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ABSTRACT

This study explores how selected course experiences at the University of Memphis (Tennessee) influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs. The course required of all elementary and early childhood education students, called "School/Community Relations," was based on the belief that parent involvement is essential to student success, that parents and teachers should be partners, that confident teachers are more likely to involve parents, and that teachers must assume leadership in reaching out to involve families and other community members. Four major assignments were required: conducting parent interviews, developing a parent involvement/education plan for one school year, developing a parental involvement notebook, and planning and implementing a parent workshop. Twenty-nine students completed pre- and post self-assessments related to their ability to work with parents. Responses indicated that all four assignments increased their confidence level, enhanced their ability to examine parental involvement myths, facilitated determination of their leadership role, and increased their "people skills." In addition, parent interviews were critical in affecting the students' attitudes, and developing the one-year plan strongly influenced student confidence. Contains examples of course assignments. (JB)

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Preparing Preservice Teachers to Take Leadership Roles in Parent Involvement Programs in Schools

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Introduction

Because of the increased changes in modern families (e.g., marital instability, rising numbers of unwed mothers, changes in role behavior, mobility and urbanization, and decreasing family size, poverty) over the last two decades, educators, researchers, politicians and parents, have begun to realize that it takes the whole community to educate the child. And the involvement of parents is critical because they are their children's first and primary teachers. Recent recognition has been given to the crucial role parents play in establishing the educability of their children, facilitating their development and achievement, and remedying educational and developmental problems (Becher, 1986). The problem often lies in the fact that many parents may not have the skills or confidence in their ability to help their children, and teachers and other educators may not have the skills, confidence, or desire to help parents assist their children in having positive outcomes in school. On the other hand, it has been found that many parents, when given the skills and opportunities to be involved in school activities of their children, become very active and resourceful (Powell, 1989).

The Goals 2000 Educate America Act implies that it is the school that must assume the leadership in reaching out to parents and communities: "Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children." Standards established by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education dictate that beginning teachers must be able to collaborate "with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community for supporting students' learning and well-being" (NCATE, 1994). Epstein (1993) has designated certain teachers who were especially effective at fostering parent partnerships as teacher-leaders. Parents whose children have teacher-leaders report that they: 1) are given many ideas for helping at home,

2) understand more about what their children are being taught, and 3) believe the teacher really has their interests at heart and wants them to help their children succeed.

One of the primary goals of the College of Education at The University of Memphis is to prepare teacher-leaders like those described by Epstein (1993). Elementary and early childhood education students at the university are required to enroll in a course called School/Community Relations that's designed to prepare them to take leadership roles in parental involvement programs in schools. This study explores how selected course experiences influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs.

Description of Course Activities

The underlying beliefs and assumptions on which course experiences were based include:

1. Parental involvement in educational activities at home and at school is essential to the child's success at school.

2. Parents and teachers should be viewed as partners in the educational enterprise. As adult learners, parents must be involved in making decisions about school involvement and educational activities that are designed for them.

3. Teachers who have a high self-esteem and who feel confident in their ability to work with parents are more likely to be assertive in reaching out to involve parents in their children's activities.

4. Teachers must assume the leadership role in reaching out to involve families and other community members in the life of the school.

Three guiding principles were used in developing the four major assignments for the course:

1. Each assignment was written for a specific purpose which was not unlike assignments that teachers take on as members of P-6 faculties.

2. Each assignment was written with a particular audience in mind, i.e., prepared for a principal, teacher team or group of parents.

3. Each assignment was sequential and developmental in nature. For example, the last assignment was more complex than the first and the last assignment was developed using information from assignments 1, 2, and 3.

The four major assignments were: 1) conducting parent interviews, 2) developing a parent involvement/education plan for one school year, 3) developing a parental involvement notebook, and 4) planning and implementing a parent workshop. Details for the assignments are found in Figures 1 through 4.

Throughout the semester course, other assignments and discussions provided information that supported the developed of the four major assignments. Early in the semester, the class discussed the elements of successful meetings for parents and the instructor modeled those elements in a workshop on reading to children. Class members completed a sample parent survey (as if they were parents) selecting topics they wanted to know more about. This data were used in developing the one year plan and the parent workshops. Other topics pursued in the course included a history of family life and parental involvement, working with diverse families, effective school-community relationships, communicating with parents, leadership training in parent education, school-based and home-based parent programs, and conducting parent-teacher conferences. Instructional strategies included simulations, videos, guest lecturers, workshops, and cooperative learning experiences.

Figure 1. Parent Interviews Assignment

Writing Assignment 1: Parent Interviews
The principal of the K-6 school where you are employed as a teacher wants to improve the involvement of parents in the life of the school. You have been asked to interview four parents to determine their present level of involvement as well as find out the kind of involvement they think is important. You will report your results to the principal in a **three- to four-page (maximum) essay, typed double-spaced**.

Date Due: **Monday, October 17, 1994**

Requirements:
Interview **four parents** (mother and father of the same child count as one interview) of children enrolled in grades P-6 to obtain the information listed below. Your completed report must include:

1. Age of child and grade level in school
2. Type of school child is attending--private, parochial, or public
3. Strategies used by the school to get parents involved in activities of the school (i.e., how are parents invited to participate, ex., telephone calls, newsletters, home visits, notes sent by children)
4. List of school activities in which the parents interviewed are involved
5. Extent of involvement of interviewed parents--number of hours per week, month or year
6. In parents' opinion, of what value or benefit is their participation in the education of their child
7. Recommendations to your principal regarding the parent involvement program at your school, based on the information gathered from the four interviews
8. A description of how the information gained from these interviews profits you as a prospective teacher

Evaluation Criteria:
You must include all the topics noted in the "Requirements" section and follow the criteria for essays handed out in class.

Figure 2. Parent Program for Academic Year

Writing Assignment 2: Parent Involvement/Education Plan for One School Year

As the team leader for the Parent Involvement/Education Committee at your P-6 school, you have been asked by the principal to develop a plan for the entire school year, from September through May. Provide **details** in your plans regarding what you propose for **each month** using the requirements that follow. Remember to consider data from your parent interviews, sample parent survey, themes being studied in your classroom, and seasonal classroom activities in which children may be involved. Your plan should be **four to six pages long, and typed** using the format shown below.

Date Due: **Monday, November 14, 1994**

Required Format:

Month of:

Title of monthly meeting or workshop session:

Type of group meeting format proposed:

Leader(s) for session: (e.g., panel of parents, nutritionist, dentist, classroom teachers)

Strategies used to invite parents to attend or participate in session:

Brief narrative description of plans for the month:

Evaluation Criteria:

You must include all the elements noted above for each month and follow the criteria for essays handed out in class.

Figure 3. Parent Notebook

Assignment 3: Parental Involvement Notebook
You are required to collect information relevant to facilitating parental involvement activities at your P-6 school. The materials will be organized in a **looseleaf notebook, with a descriptive index,** so that it can serve as a useful and accessible resource for you and other teachers at your school. The notebook **must** include a **minimum of ten entries** in **each of the categories** listed below. Use a variety of sources **(i.e., do not copy all entries from one or two workbooks, textbooks, journals or magazines).**

Date Due: Monday, November 21, 1994

Required Categories of Entries:
1. Involving parents in the classroom
2. Involving parents in the school
3. Involving parents in educational activities at home
4. Written home-school communication
5. Parent education activities
6. Publications from organizations and agencies related to parental involvement or education (**see addresses to write for resources beginning on page 439 of text, call or visit local community agencies to obtain related publications, contact local teachers or parents for copies of materials**)
7. Other categories

BEGIN COLLECTING TODAY TO AVOID THE LAST MINUTE RUSH!

Figure 4. Parent Workshop

Writing Assignment 4: Parent Workshop--A Group Project

You are a member of a team of teachers at your P-6 school that have been assigned the responsibility for planning and implementing an evening, parent education group meeting that meets the interests and needs of your parents. You will work together as a team to plan and conduct the meeting. Remember to consider data from the sample parent survey, themes being studied in your classrooms, and seasonal classroom activities in which children may be involved.

Date Due: Monday, October 17, 1994 -First draft of written plan
Nov. 21, 28, or Dec. 5,1994 -Oral presentations
Monday, Dec. 5, 1994 -Final written report due

Requirements:

Your project will consist of two parts.

1. **Written Plan.** The written plan will include
   - o Workshop or meeting title
   - o Goal of meeting or workshop (major purpose)
   - o Objectives (outcomes for parents, what you want them to be able to do)
   - o Activities (methods and strategies used to achieve the objectives)
   - o Evaluation (strategies and techniques for determining if objectives have been met)
   - o Materials and resources (needed to carry out activities). Use standard bibliography format.
2. **Oral Presentation.** Each group will have one hour to present their workshop during the last three class sessions of the semester. Teams are encouraged to use appropriate audio-visual materials as a part of their presentation. Copies of handouts required and equipment needs must be submitted to the instructor at least one week in at advance of the oral presentation.

Each team member must be an **active participant** in both the **written and oral presentations.** The written plan will consist of a **maximum of two typewritten pages.** One written plan for each group will be submitted to the instructor.

Evaluation Criteria:

The written plan must include all the components listed above in the "Requirements" section and the criteria for essays handed out in class. The **final group grade** will be based on the quality of both the **written and oral presentations.**

Research Questions

1. How have selected course experiences influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of their comfort and competence levels in planning and implementing parent involvement programs?
2. To what extent have course experiences affected the attitudes of preservice teachers toward working with parents?

Data Collection

Students enrolled in the course completed pre- and post self-assessments related to their ability to work with parents. The assessment consisted of eleven items related to: 1) students' knowledge and comfort level in conducting parent conferences or interviews, 2) accessing resources needed to develop parent programs,3) planning and implementing parent workshops, 4) successful strategies for involving parents in school activities, and 5) developing positive relations with parents. Responses were solicited on a five-point Likert-type scale, within which 1 was low and 5 was high.

At the end of the semester student made reflective statements regarding their course experiences in response to the following question:

> For each of the four major course requirements completed, i.e., 1) conducting parent interviews, 2) developing a parent involvement/education plan for one year, 3) compiling a parental involvement notebook, and 4) planning and conducting a parent workshop, discuss a, b, and c.
>
> a. Discuss the effect that planning and completing the assignment had on your developing competence and comfort level as a prospective classroom teacher who will be working with parents.
>
> b. How has this experience affected your attitudes about working with parents?
>
> c. Include comments about other course experiences that are relevant to this discussion.

Observation notes were made by the instructor throughout the semester on in-class activities and other assignments completed by the students.

Summary of Findings

Thirty-one undergraduate students were enrolled in the School/Community Relations course during the 1994 fall semester. Ninety-three percent of the students were elementary education majors and 7% were early childhood education majors. Eighty-eight percent of the students plan to graduate by May 1995, and therefore would be eligible to be fully certified teachers with their own classrooms by September 1995, one year from the date enrolled in the course.

Twenty-nine students completed both the pre- and post self-assessments related to working with parents. On each of the eleven items included on the self-assessment, t-tests revealed significance differences between students' pre- and post responses. Table 1 shows that at the beginning of the course, students rated themselves the lowest on: 1) knowledge about effective parent workshops (1.97), 2) accessing resources to develop a one year plan (2.03), 3) ability to plan and implement effective parent workshops (2.10), and 4) knowledge about school-based and home-based parent involvement activities (2.38). On the pre-assessment, students rated teacher efficacy the highest (4.31), the extent to which teachers feel that they can make a difference in the lives of their students. On the post-assessment, all items were rated high with average scores ranging from 4.24 to 4.79.

When analyzing the qualitative data we looked for reference to other courses where like experiences had been assigned; for attitudes about parental involvement; and for levels of competence and comfort that resulted from the course assignments. There were additional themes that emerged from the data of the four assignment areas.

Table 1

Preservice Teachers' Responses to Self-Assessment as Related to Working with Parents

Assessment Item		Pre-test M	Pre-test SD	Post-test M	Post-test SD	t-value
1.	How knowledgeable are you about the elements of an effective conference or interview with parents?	2.55	1.02	4.59	.50	10.42**
2.	How comfortable are you with your ability to conduct effective conferences or interviews with parents?	2.97	1.09	4.31	.60	6.02**
3.	How comfortable are you about accessing resources needed to develop a one year parent education/ involvement plan for a K-6 school?	2.03	.73	4.45	.63	13.75**
4.	How knowledgeable are you about the elements of effective workshops for parents?	1.97	.82	4.72	.53	14.52**
5.	How comfortable are you with your ability to plan and implement effective workshops for parents?	2.10	.86	4.66	.61	13.02**
6.	How knowledgeable are you about successful strategies for involving parents in school activities of their children?	2.93	.75	4.45	.63	7.74**

Table 1, cont.

Preservice Teachers' Responses to Self-Assessment as Related to Working with Parents

	Assessment Item	Pre-test M	Pre-test SD	Post-test M	Post-test SD	t-value
7.	How comfortable are you with the process of developing positive relations with parents of children that will be enrolled in your class (es)?	3.76	.74	4.49	.50	5.01*
8.	To what extent do you feel that you can make a difference in the lives of the students that will be enrolled in your class (es)?	4.31	.80	4.79	.49	2.64**
9.	How knowledgeable are you about the advantages and disadvantages of parental involvement in school activities of their children?	3.24	1.12	4.72	.53	6.74**
10.	How comfortable do you feel about your ability to encourage parents to increase their involvement in the school activities of their children?	3.41	.91	4.41	.57	5.82**
11.	How knowledgeable are you about the variety of parent involvement activities implemented in school-based and home-based programs?	2.38	.73	4.24	.64	11.46**

n = 29
** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
Scale: 1 = low, 5 = high

Along with the expected themes concerning confidence level, and previous course experiences, the following themes emerged from the interview assignment data: 1) perceptions and myths of parental involvement, 2) recognition of the benefits to children of parental involvement, and 3) an understanding of the role of the teacher in parental involvement.

From the analysis of responses given by preservice teachers concerning how helpful it was to do the educational plan for parents, the following themes emerged: 1) this was a particularly challenging assignment, yet greatly valued, 2) the activities done prior to developing the plan and the planning itself helped to change negative attitudes, 3) classroom teachers have the primary role in parental involvement, and 4) knowledge was gained from class and was most helpful in writing the educational plan. These themes were in addition to level of confidence and previous course assignments.

In response to the notebook assignment, students expressed consensus on: 1) the value of the notebook, 2) amazement at the availability of resource materials, and 3) proposals for future use of the notebook. Many also agreed that compiling a notebook was an experience they had received in other teacher education courses.

In addition to the themes of previous course work experiences and the development of confidence, two additional themes emerged from the workshop data: 1) the workshop was a helpful activity in understanding how to work with parents, and 2) the workshop was an opportunity to learn to work with other people.

Student responses indicated that all four assignments increased their confidence level. Likewise, the responses suggested that the ability to work with parents and to examine parental involvement myths were enhanced. The determination of the role of the teacher in promoting parental involvement was

facilitated through the interviews, notebook, workshop, and in the educational plan assignments. The workshop assignment was perceived primarily in terms of increasing "people skills," the ability to work effectively with others. The notebook was viewed primarily as a ready resource for parents.

The students indicated that they had not been exposed to the interview process, nor to the process of devising an educational plan in prior teacher education course work. They also indicated that although they had compiled notebooks and had presented before groups in other classes, these assignments were unique in purpose.

Conclusions

Students' responses from both the quantitative and qualitative data appears to support the premise that completeing the four major major assignments for the School/Community Relations course (i.e., parent interviers, parental involvement plan, parental involvement notebook, and parent workshop) enhanced their comfort and confidence levels in working with parents. Likewise, their responses sugest that the class experiences enhanced their attitudes as it relates to collaborating with parents to involve them in the school activities of their children.

While all the assignments appeared to influence comfort and confidence levels as well as attitudes, there appeared to be an especially strong relationships between selected assignments and related student outcomes.

1. Parent interviews. The parent interviews assignment appeared to be a critical first step in affecting student attitudes about the importance of parental involvement and dismantling some of the myths regarding parents' disinterest in their child's education.

2. Parental involvement/education plan. Developing the one year plan appeared to be a strong influence on the students' confidence and enthusiasm for developing and implementing successful activities for parents.

3. Parental involvement notebook. The notebook was viewed both as a ready resource for parents and for teachers in planning parent program. It was also an eye-opening experience for many students relative to the enormous number of resources that are available to assist in parent involvement and education activities.

4. Parent workshop. The parent workshop assignment was perceived primarily in terms of increasing "people skills," the ability to work effectively with parents and other teachers.

Finally, students' responses suggest that it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to take the leadership in reaching out to parents and community people to involve them in the life of the school. And that their involvement is essential to the child's success in school. At the end of course, most of the students appeared confident and very eager to assume the teacher-leader role in their future classrooms and schools. However, the "real test" to determine is this is "good teacher education" is to complete a follow-up study with some of these students as they move into their practical settings, i.e., student teaching and first years of teaching, to determine if these emerging professionals are able to transfer these new skills, attitudes, and enthusiasm into action.

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